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ABSTRACT

The current emphasis on "teaching in the language of the child" has led to a demand for bilingual programs in Mexican-American communities. Ninety preschool children, assumed to be Spanish speaking, were referred to a summer program for amelioration of English language deficiency. Spanish and English versions of the Preschool Language Scale were administered to determine language dominance, developmental status, and areas of deficiency. Results indicate that prime consideration should be given to the assessment of the preschool child's language status before assuming competency or dominance in any language or deciding to establish a bilingual program. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (Author)

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Abstract

The current emphasis on "teaching in the language of the child" has led to a demand for bilingual programs in Mexican-American communities.

Ninety preschool children, assumed to be Spanish speaking, were referred to a summer program for amelioration of English language deficiency. Spanish and English versions of the Preschool Language Scale were administered to determine language dominance, developmental status, and areas of deficiency. Results indicate that prime consideration should be given to the assessment of the preschool child's language status before assuming competency or dominance in any language, or deciding to establish a bilingual program.

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The current emphasis on "teaching in the language of the child" has led to a demand for bilingual programs in Mexican-American communities. The decision to develop such programs has often been based on imprecise judgments of those in authority, without careful analysis of the children's language needs.

The experiences gained in two successive preschool language programs in a Mexican-American community provided an opportunity to evaluate language status of children usually assumed to be Spanish speaking. The results may throw light on the importance of identifying language status before decisions regarding programs are made.

Method

Subjects consisted of 90 children considered Spanish speaking and/or markedly deficient in English who were referred to a summer program for development of English language skills. Mean age was 5.1. A subgroup of 68 children from a previous pilot study was also available for analysis. Spanish and English versions of the Preschool Language Scale were administered to all children upon entry into the program.

The Preschool Language Scale (PLS) is a two-part, individually administered instrument, consisting of an auditory comprehension and a verbal ability section. In both Spanish and English versions the Auditory Comprehension Section (AC) is measured nonverbally, while the Verbal Ability Section (VA) requires verbal responses. This scale, based on psycholinguistic theories, was developed to evaluate language status. Positive evidence for validity and reliability has been accumulated in a variety of earlier studies (Ward, 1970; Steiner and Zimmerman, 1971; Zimmerman and Steiner, 1970).

Subjects were sorted into four categories on the basis of test results: Spanish speaking, here defined as having either an Auditory Comprehension or Verbal Ability Quotient or both of 71 or above with both English scores below this cutoff; bilingual, where one score of 71 or above was achieved on either aspect of the scale on both Spanish and English versions; English speaking, where one score of 71 or above was achieved on the English version, while Spanish was, at most, minimal; and language deficient, where all scores in Spanish and English fell at 70 or below.

Results

Table I shows the percentage of children in each of the above categories, with their Means and Standard Deviations on both versions of the Preschool Language Scale. Only 18% were solely Spanish speaking, in spite of this being the theoretical basis for referral: 23% were bilingual, with comparable English and Spanish skills. Slightly more children, 28% proved to be language deficient in both Spanish and English. This meant that none had reached a language age of 3½, the level determined by psycholinguists to indicate basic language competency.

Of the Spanish-speaking children, half had essentially no English-language skills while the rest were able to handle beginning aspects of English.

Of the language-deficient children, while all were lagging, 40% were apparently Spanish oriented with essentially no English-language skills, and 24% were apparently English oriented with essentially no Spanish skills, while 36% were developing bilingual.

When the Spanish-speaking children are examined as a group, their Spanish skills are considersbly below average, at the borderline level. In contrast, those children who were English speaking were much closer to average in their language skills. Their PLS Spanish scores are omitted since these children rarely indicated any knowledge of Spanish.

The bilingual children were markedly similar in both English and Spanish, and their scores fell between those of the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking children.

When children who were language deficient are compared, the Spanish scores are somewhat higher than English scores.

For all samples, the Auditory Comprehension score is above the Verbal Ability score. This is in spite of the fact that item composition of this test is corrected to allow for the natural superiority of language understanding as compared to use.

Results can be compared to findings from the earlier pilot program which included 68 children, referred as either Spanish speaking or deficient in language. The distribution of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking children was remarkably similar. Slightly more children were classified as language deficient and fewer as bilingual, reflecting the presence of older children referred because of unsuccessful kindergarten experiences.

Discussion

This study has indicated that evaluating both the English and Spanish status of Mexican-American children facilitates understanding their language needs and minimizes either over or underestimating their language

skills. The value of such measurement is evident when the actual rather than assumed Spanish and English status was established. Far from being fluent in Spanish and deficient in English, more than half of these children had adequate English to profit from English language instruction, and only 18% were so deficient in English and fluent in Spanish that they might profit from initial Spanish instruction (English as a second language). Also, 28% were so pointedly deficient in either language that one could not assume that there was a need to use Spanish as a vehicle for instruction.

The major conclusion from this study is that identification of a Mexican-American child as Spanish speaking or bilingual based only on subjective impressions might well invalidate decisions regarding the most effective language for instruction, or the type of program needed to help the child learn. What is required is the use of a measuring instrument which will permit evaluation of skills in both languages. If this is accomplished at the preschool level, then the most suitable language for instruction can be determined, and programs can be selected which will be both meaningful and productive for the child.

The simultaneous use of Spanish and English Versions of the Preschool Language Scale appears to be a valid approach to such language identification.

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TABLE I

Means and Standard Deviations on the English and Spanish Versions of the Preschool Language Scale

			ENGLISH				SPANISH			
			ACQ		VAQ		ACQ		VAQ	
Group	N	%	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Spanish	16	18	42.4	16.66	38.1	13.14	77.5	3.17	74.8	13.12
English	28	31	91.8	14.08	85.6	16.3		(omitted)		
Bilingual	21	23	86.0	12.33	80.0	12.84	87.8	12.90	84.5	13.62
Neither	25	28	43.7	17.74	38.8	14.51	51.8	15.05	49.4	13.05

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